

Seasonal Pantry: The benefits of coconut

Coconut is a good source of milk, cream and oil made from the meaty flesh.

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Confused about coconut and all the products that are made from the ubiquitous tropical fruit? If so, no one can blame you. There is a lot of confusion, in part because we do not live in coconut country and in part because a lot of the terms associated with it are a tad amorphous.

Crack open an aged coconut and the liquid you might find inside may be called water, juice or milk. It is not a commercial product but is most accurately identified as water. The cans and bottles of coconut juice that line the shelves of markets these days come from young green coconuts, before their flesh and outer shell have hardened.

Coconut milk, coconut cream and coconut oil are made from the flesh of mature coconuts. Once scorned as full of dangerous saturated fats, the coconut and its products are now recognized as healthful in a huge variety of ways.

Coconut oil, for example, is an excellent choice for high-temperature cooking, but it also has a huge variety of other uses. It is said to help heal skin diseases, including fungal infections; may help reverse diabetes; kills bacteria and viruses; and conditions and strengthens hair.

It can be used as a deodorant, sunscreen, cutting board conditioner, leather polish, lubricant and as a substitute for WD-40. It also is said to have special benefits for people living with HIV, AIDS and Alzheimer's. Two decades ago, there were studies that confirmed this.

Coconut oil, cream and milk are readily available these days, though you'll find the biggest selection in Asian markets and in markets such as G&G that cater to a large Asian population. There are several brands; I've always found Chaokoah reliably good.

Coconut oil should not be confused with palm oil or palm kernel oil. They come from a different variety of tree, enormous orchards of which are causing serious habitat and species destruction in tropical regions. This oil is not a common retail product but it is found in many prepared foods, so read labels if you wish to avoid it.

Coconut products are used throughout the Pacific islands, Southeast Asia and regions of India. For recipes for Indian, Thai and Malaysian dishes that call for coconut products, visit "Eat This Now" at pantry.blogs.pressdemocrat.com, where I have also posted photographs of coconuts and their products.

Variations of this sweet tonic have been making the rounds for months, both online and at beverage stalls in farmers markets, sometimes with the moniker "golden tea." The popularity is fueled, in part, by recent recognition of the tremendous health benefits of turmeric, known to be an effective anti-inflammatory. To enjoy the benefits of turmeric, there must be piperine — an active ingredient in black pepper — to enable absorption.

Coconut Milk & Turmeric Tonic

Makes 4 to 6 servings

1 13½ ounce can of coconut milk

— Juice of 1 lemon or 1 lime

1 tablespoon honey or coconut cream, more or less to taste

1 tablespoons grated ginger or 2 teaspoons ground ginger

1 tablespoon ground turmeric

½ teaspoon ground black pepper

¼ teaspoon ground cayenne

— Pinch of kosher salt

Put the coconut milk into a small saucepan set over low heat, and stir in 1 cup of water. Add the lemon or lime, honey or coconut cream, ginger, turmeric, black pepper, cayenne and pinch of salt.

Stir gently as the liquid heats. When it is very hot but has not yet boiled, cover and remove from the heat.

Let steep for 5 or 10 minutes, pour into cups and enjoy. If using fresh ginger, pour through a strainer. This can be refrigerated and reheated; it will keep for a day or two.

This soup is ubiquitous in Thai restaurants and is one of the most common ways that many of us are introduced to coconut milk. It is easy to make at home. Look for fresh galagal, a rhizome similar to ginger, at local markets such as G&G, Oliver's and Pacific.

Coconut Milk Rice

Makes about 2 ½ to 3 cups

1 cup jasmine rice

1 teaspoon kosher salt

¾ cup coconut milk

Fill a medium bowl half full with water. Put the rice into a strainer, submerge in the water and agitate. Remove the strainer and rice, replace the cloudy water with fresh water and continue until the water remains clear when the rice is rinsed. Drain the rinsed rice, put it in a saucepan and add 1¼ cups cold water and the salt. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce the heat to low, cover the pan tightly and cook for 20 minutes. Remove from the heat and let the rice steam, covered and undisturbed, for 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, warm ¾ cup coconut milk over low heat until heated through. Just before serving, fluff the rice with a fork, tip it into a serving bowl and stir in the coconut milk.

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